



# Animal Pest Alert

## Ferret

The Ferret (*Mustela putorius furo*) is the domesticated form of the wild European Polecat (*M. putorius*). It is often considered as a subspecies (and *furo* added to the scientific name) because it has been domesticated for hundreds of years. However, the Ferret and Polecat are genetically the same species, able to breed together and produce fertile young. For clarity, the term 'Ferret' will be used here for both wild and domestic forms.

The Ferret is not native to Australia, but the domesticated form is kept here as a pet. It has the potential to establish wild populations in Australia and become a pest.

NOT NATIVE



PHOTO: DISC / ALAMY



Common Bushtail Possum

NATIVE

PHOTO: GERRY PEARCE 37 / ALAMY



Southern Brown Bandicoot

NATIVE

PHOTO: DAVE WATTS



Eastern Quoll

NATIVE

PHOTO: DAVE WATTS

Please report sightings of Ferrets in the wild – Freecall 1800 084 881

# Ferret

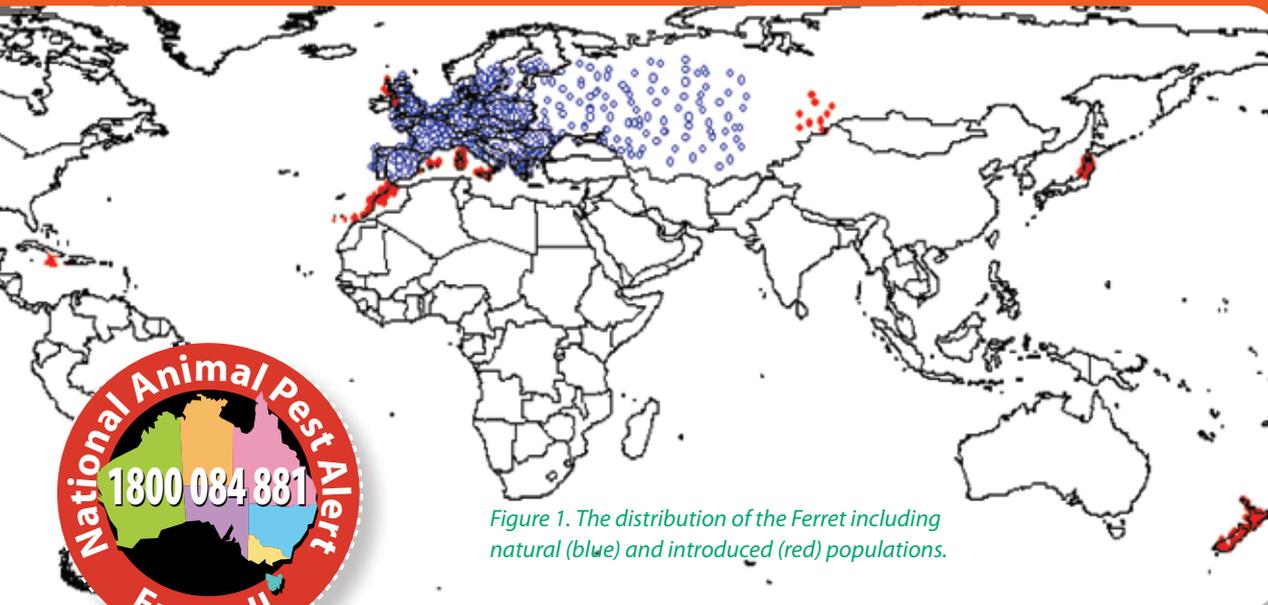


Figure 1. The distribution of the Ferret including natural (blue) and introduced (red) populations.



## Description

The Ferret has a long, narrow body of 20 to 46 cm in length, with short legs and a tail of 7 to 14 cm. The typical colour is dark brown to black with pale yellow underfur and longer, black-tipped guard hairs (Figure 2). The tail is black and bushy. The face is greyish-white with dark areas, giving a masked appearance, but these marks can be absent in some domesticated animals. The brown colour forms are referred to as 'sable' and are the most common; other less common colours include silver, chocolate and white (with dark or red eyes) (Figure 3). Immature Ferrets look similar to adults.



Figure 2. The pale underfur and long guard hairs are obvious on this wild Ferret in New Zealand (photo: Department of Conservation Te Papa Atawhai).

## Mistaken identity

Ferrets are not usually mistaken for native animals, but very occasionally this does happen. Native species that could be confused with Ferrets include:

- Common Brushtail Possum (occurs throughout Australia)
- Brown Bandicoots (two species occur in northern, north-eastern and southern Australia including Tasmania)
- Quolls (four species occur, each with separate distributions in northern, south-western, and eastern Australia including Tasmania).



Figure 3. Less common colours of domesticated Ferrets include chocolate and white (photo: Arco Images GmbH / Alamy).

## Distribution

The natural range of the Ferret is Western Europe extending east to the Ural Mountains in west central Russia (Figure 1). Introduced populations occur as a result of the movement of wild Ferrets by people, as well as from the escape or release of pet Ferrets. Feral populations occur in Russia, Sardinia, Sicily, Morocco, the Canary Islands, the Isle of Man, and mainland Britain, as well as on the islands of Mull, Harris, Arran and Bute (off the coast of Scotland) and the Isle of Anglesey (off the coast of North Wales). Introduced populations have also occurred for a period of time in Japan and Jamaica.

The Ferret was also introduced to Australia and New Zealand in the late 1880s. It is now a widespread, established pest in New Zealand (Figure 4), but is yet to establish permanent populations in Australia. However, reports of Ferrets living in the wild occur from time to time in southern Australia, mainly in Western Australia and Tasmania.

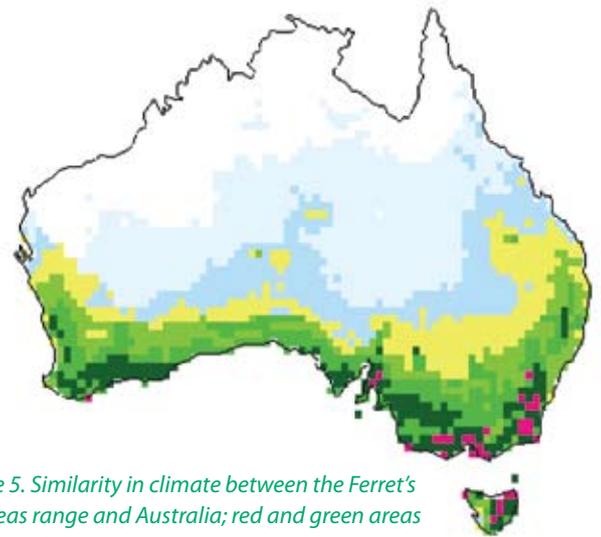
## Habitat

The Ferret lives in open forests, grasslands and bushland, as well as modified habitats including areas near human settlements, around rubbish disposal sites and on agricultural land. In addition, it can live in coastal areas (such as sea cliffs and sand dunes) and along river banks.

Please report sightings of Ferrets



*Figure 4. The introduced Ferret has established in the wild in New Zealand and occupies a range of habitats (photo: Rod Morris).*



*Figure 5. Similarity in climate between the Ferret's overseas range and Australia; red and green areas are most similar.*

### Reproduction, food and behaviour

The Ferret breeds once a year. Litters can contain up to 12 young but three to seven is more usual. Young Ferrets (called kits) become independent when about three months old. Den sites are located under cover in crevices, hollow logs and burrows of other animals, especially rabbits. In New Zealand, dens have been found in outlying farm buildings.

The Ferret is a carnivore that preys on small mammals such as rabbits, rats, mice and possums. It will hunt for birds, particularly those that nest on the ground or in burrows like some seabirds and flightless birds. It preys on reptiles, frogs and invertebrates. Eggs and carrion are also readily consumed.

Although the wild Ferret is nocturnal, it can occasionally be seen during the day. It runs with an arched back and is very supple or sinuous in appearance, but walks with a straight body, sniffing the ground repeatedly for scent.

Male and female Ferrets have separate home ranges that overlap. When food is scarce, home range sizes increase. Though usually solitary, pairs are sometimes seen foraging together and sharing dens.

In the wild Ferrets live for about four to six years, but in captivity they can live up to 14 years.

### Damage by the Ferret

In its natural range the Ferret is a minor pest of agriculture, causing damage to poultry production by preying on chickens and eggs.

Transmission of the disease Bovine Tuberculosis (Tb) to domestic stock is a serious threat to agriculture in New Zealand. The Ferret is a Tb carrier and can infect stock through direct contact. The environment can also be contaminated with Tb-infected Ferret faeces and urine that stock come into contact with while grazing.

The Ferret can inflict painful bites on people and cause injury requiring medical treatment. Infants and small children are particularly at risk from facial bites.



*Figure 6. Ferrets can affect backyard poultry production by taking eggs and chickens (photo: Arco Images GmbH / Alamy).*

The Ferret is considered a moderate environmental pest, particularly in New Zealand, where vulnerable birds such as the Weka, Kiwi, Kakapo, Kea and Laughing Owl (now extinct) all declined in numbers after the Ferret became established in the wild. In New Zealand, populations of Black Stilt



*Figure 7. Ferrets will kill and eat the chicks of ground-nesting native birds like this Yellow-eyed Penguin chick (an endangered species) in New Zealand (photo: Rod Morris).*

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(considered one of the world's most endangered birds) and Royal Albatross (vulnerable) are also adversely affected when their chicks are killed by the Ferret.

Control programs are carried out in New Zealand to reduce populations of the Ferret and its destructive relatives the Stoat and Weasel. A variety of methods are used including traps, baits and detector dogs. Biological control methods are also being investigated.

## Potential to be a pest in Australia

The Ferret is rated as being highly likely to establish wild populations in Australia and become a pest of agriculture, the environment and public amenity.

A scientific risk assessment conducted by the Department of Agriculture and Food in Western Australia and endorsed by the national Vertebrate Pests Committee indicates that the Ferret poses an extreme threat (the highest of four categories) to Australia. Part of the assessment showed that the climates of the Ferret's overseas range and Australia are very similar (Figure 5).

Therefore, it is important that Ferrets do not establish in the wild in Australia and that new genetic stock from overseas is not permitted to enter the country.

In Australia, the Ferret has the potential to establish small populations in the wild that could go undetected for decades. These populations could increase rapidly when favourable conditions occur. Successful populations could also arise if any adaptation to current environmental conditions occurred, or as a result of new genetic stock that allowed Ferrets to thrive under a wider range of conditions in the wild.

The Ferret is an aggressive predator that could threaten biodiversity in Australia, with a wide range of Australian native birds, mammals and marsupials, reptiles and frogs potentially at risk. Ground-nesting birds could be under particular threat from direct predation on their eggs and chicks (Figure 7), while small marsupials could be ideal prey. The Ferret could also affect commercial and backyard poultry production by taking chickens and eggs (Figure 6).

## Ferrets in the wild

Many Ferrets are kept as pets in Australia and although many owners keep them leashed to avoid escape, accidental release can occur when the animals are outside their cages or on excursions (Figure 8). Some Ferrets are still used to hunt rabbits, a practice that can result in their escape into the wild. Some unwanted Ferrets are also intentionally released by irresponsible owners.

### Important Disclaimer

The Chief Executive Officer of the Department of Agriculture and Food and the State of Western Australia accept no liability whatsoever by reason of negligence or otherwise arising from the use or release of this information or any part of it.



Figure 8. Ferrets should be kept securely on a leash when taken on excursions (photo: Petra Wegner / Alamy).

Ferrets make demanding pets that must be kept indoors or in escape-proof enclosures. They have a strong odour (particularly unsterilized males) and can give painful bites. They also have little monetary value because they are commonly available.

All these factors may contribute to Ferrets escaping or being released into the wild. Some Ferret societies in Australia offer a rescue service for unwanted or dumped Ferrets and advocate responsible ownership.

Ferrets have occasionally been recorded in the wild in Western Australia and there are unconfirmed reports of their presence on King Island in Bass Strait. In Tasmania some survey work has been carried out at South Arm (an outer coastal, suburb of Hobart). This is because authorities have received many reports of Ferrets at large in that area, as well as from the south-east of the state generally. However, there are currently no established Ferret populations confirmed in the wild in Australia.

## Risk management

In recognition of the risk posed by the Ferret, various jurisdictions have laws regarding their keeping. It is illegal to keep or import Ferrets into the Northern Territory and Queensland, and a permit is required to keep Ferrets in the Australian Capital Territory. Ferrets are permitted in the other states, although in Tasmania it is an offence to release Ferrets into the wild.

To help prevent Ferrets from establishing in the wild and becoming pests in Australia, it is essential that captive animals are maintained in secure enclosures. Unwanted Ferrets should be surrendered to a responsible organisation, not released. Any Ferrets seen in the wild should be reported to the nearest relevant government department or wildlife authority so that appropriate action can be taken.

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